The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE FIRST WORDS OF JESUS

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John M. Buchanan

Great one, austere,
By whose intent the distant star
Holds it course clear,
Now make this spirit soar—
Give it that ease.
Out of the absolute
Abstracted grief, comfortless, mute,
Sound the clear note,
Pure, piercing as the flute:
Give it precision.
Austere, great one,
By whose grace the inalterable song
May still be wrested from
The corrupt lung:
Give it strict form.

"Prayer before Work"
Selected Poems of May Sarton

FOURTH
PRESBY
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Scripture
Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-42

"When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?'" John 1:38a (NRSV)

The first words Jesus said after he was baptized by John, according to the Fourth Gospel, are a question:

"What are you looking for?"

He asked the question of two men who were following him.

Might it be an important question for you and for me this morning?

There was a time several centuries ago when our ardent Puritan ancestors tried to legislate church attendance so that missing Sunday service was a kind of crime, a petty misdemeanor.

Failing at that, they succeeded in creating an ethos that regarded missing church on Sunday morning as an anti-social act. That ethos proved to be remarkably resilient in this culture, living on, in one form or another, in many of the communities that shaped and formed us. The sound of a lawn mower on Sunday morning, for instance, was regarded as a defiantly secular, if not outright anti-social, anti-religious proclamation.

Over on the Roman Catholic side of the street, the church historically tried to get the faithful to agree that missing mass on Sunday was a sin, perhaps a minor one, but a sin with repercussions nonetheless. Arduous evangelicals who didn't agree with Rome on much of anything else agreed here. Sunday morning was for church going, period.

And then over the years it became a kind of social norm, the place to be on Sunday morning, an opportunity for social and business contacts, that mysterious process we have learned to call "networking." Annie Dillard, in *An American Childhood*, remembers sitting in the balcony of a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh with her junior high friends; looking down at the exquisitely attired congregation, the industrial and financial giants of the city, who had partied together the night before and would head back to the country club for bloody mary's and brunch after church, but who, for the moment, were praying together.

And then a few decades ago that all seemed to change. The culture seemed to become more secular. Whether it did or not is an important question — but it became OK not to go to church on Sunday morning. It was no longer a social or business deficit to be a regular non-attender. It did not affect actual attendance much, but everybody agrees that there was a kind of seismic shift in our culture in the way we view and the reasons we give for attending church on Sunday morning.

So, why are you here? Whatever possessed you to get out of a warm bed, ignore the paper, coffee, Sunday morning TV, (which I am told is quite good) the joy of an utterly empty and quiet space in your hurried, hassled life, put on good clothes and come here? Why this Sunday in particular? As I was writing this it was snowing steadily; it was cold and dreary outside; and for some reason I thought about one of my favorite occasions and rituals of late winter and early spring: the day the Cubs tickets arrive. Several of us on the staff share tickets, and we decide who gets to go to which games by a kind of lottery. When the tickets arrive, I look at the schedule and the calendar and my first choice is an occasion that I think will be just perfect: a night game, Tuesday or Wednesday, near the end of June, not too hot, not too cool; it's balmy, about 72 degrees, clear as a bell, a light breeze is blowing, the ivy is green, the lights, the hot dogs, the Cubs are still in first place — perfection! And I thought that if I were planning days to attend church, this Sunday, the second in January, is one I would not choose. Christmas is over, decorations are down, choir and ministers are worn out, probably on vacation or wishing they were; it's not Lent yet. In fact, the high liturgical churches call this time between Christmas and Lent "Ordinary Time," not exactly an inducement, and besides the odds are that the weather will be terrible.

So, why are you here? What exactly are you looking for? Which, of course, is the first thing Jesus says in the fourth Gospel. "What are you looking for?"

It's an interesting story. New Testament scholars are interested in it because it is so different from the way Matthew, Mark and Luke tell it. At the beginning of the story in Matthew, Mark and Luke, after his baptism by John, Jesus does the initiating: walks along the Sea of Galilee, sees some fishermen, asks them to follow him and they do. He calls; they respond. He orders; they obey.

The way John tells it, several people become curious about him because of something their leader has just said. They are disciples of John the Baptist, a firebrand, charismatic preacher who looked and acted like one of the prophets out of the past. John and Jesus of Nazareth have just met; Jesus has asked John to baptize him, and then John uses two unusual and striking titles to address Jesus: "Lamb of God" and "Son of God." Whereupon his two followers leave him and fall in behind Jesus. And Jesus turns and asks them, "What are you looking for?"

I'm intrigued by that; by the suggestion that sometimes God comes to us, out of the blue, and it's all grace, all God's initiative, God's search for us. But sometimes, this way of telling it suggests, the human search is part of the theological equation. God meets us because we're in the right place, seeking, looking. In any event, their response is equally peculiar, "What are you looking for?" They answer, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He says, "Come and see" and they do, and they stay all day, which is to suggest that what they are looking for is not an answer to a question — but someone to follow and a place to be. It's an important question, is it not, in a time and place where it is not necessary for us to be here this morning? "What are you looking for?"

This is the year the Baby Boomers start turning fifty, the "trend setters" and "taste makers" who have had a profound influence on our age and on all of us, whether or not we are technically baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. Because they are such an enormous market force they are the most studied and analyzed group of people in American history.

One of the best studies is by a University of California sociologist, Wade Clark Roof. His book is entitled *A Generation of Seekers.*

> "This is a generation of seekers," he writes. "Diverse as they (we) are — from Christian fundamentalists to radical feminists, from New Age explorers to get-rich-quick M.B.A.s, baby boomers have found that they have to discover for themselves what gives their lives meaning and what values to live by."

Professor Roof thinks that our easy caricature of our time and this generation, particularly as narcissistic, greedy, selfish, the "Me Generation," the "Now Generation," is too easy and not accurate. There is a significant searching going on.

> "There is widespread ferment today that reaches deep within our lives ... Religious and spiritual themes are surfacing in a rich variety of ways — in Eastern religion, in evangelical and fundamentalist teaching, in mysticism and New Age movements ... in Twelve Step recovery groups ... many who dropped out of churches years ago are shopping around for a congregation." [p. 4]

Roof borrows a term from psychology to describe what is going on — a "second journey into self, inwardly appraising self, but moving outward toward others." He concludes, "We are reaching out to commit ourselves to something of importance, yearning for relationships, connections, longing for more stable anchors for our lives."

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asked. Perhaps it is exactly what he would ask us.

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox wrote a book recently on the spectacular rise of Pentecostalism throughout the world and comes to conclusions similar to Wade Clark Roof's.

Cox says we're look for "coherence," some sense that our lives fit into a big picture, something that modern secular society no longer provides, something he calls "experiential spirituality."

When the Pope visited several years ago Cox went to Colorado to observe the huge Catholic youth convocation. Thousands of young people were there — back packers, hikers, young and strong, wearing Pope John Paul II T-shirts. Cox listened as TV reporters interviewed the kids and discovered that few of them knew anything at all about his teaching, could not identify a single papal encyclical, and when asked about the Pope's continuing and increasing emphasis on the church's prohibition of contraceptives, simply shrugged ... no big deal.

The Pope, Cox concluded, "with his cape and mitre, wearing his ancient colorful vestments, is a living symbol of something they long for, an alternative to the vacancy and monotony of their sped-up consumer culture." [*Fire from Heaven*, p. 307]

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

The first people who came to him were looking for something perhaps not terribly different from us.

Some were looking for healing, some were looking for entertainment — for novelty, something unique in the midst of the daily routine. Some were looking for heaven, some deeply spiritual reason for confidence in the face of human mortality; some were looking for a fight. Some were looking for food. Some were looking for hope.

Later in the story, there will come a time when his disciples say to him, with no little exasperation, "Everyone is looking for you." [see Leonard Sweet, *Homiletics*, January to March, 1996] And that is the truth! Everyone is looking — looking for someone to follow, looking for something important to believe and live for and die for. Everyone is looking for him.

His cousin John, who baptizes him in the Jordan River, seems to know intuitively who he is, that this is the one — the answer to the question. "The Lamb of God" he says. "The Son of God" he says. And the sense of it is that this is not something John has figured out on his own, or reasoned his way through, or concluded intellectually after reading all the books and attending all the spiritual growth seminars he could squeeze in his busy schedule. The sense of it is that this affirmation of faith, this ability to confess "Lamb of God - Son of God" has been given to him as a gift. He probably can't explain it either but somehow, standing there with Jesus, he knows it.

Leonard Sweet says it can happen instantaneously, like a bolt out of the blue, or it can be a process that takes a lifetime — this ability to say Lamb of God — to know enough to follow him. There are moments — moments given to us, but also moments that happen because we are searching, because in the midst of our busy lives we are engaged in looking, seeking, even following a little.

Last September a group of us were in Israel and, visiting all the requisite tourist spots and holy sites, came to the Jordan River: miles and miles from the place where Jesus would have been baptized by John, and where John would have said — "Lamb of God" and where disciples would have tentatively followed and where he would have asked "What are you looking for?"

It's a big tourist attraction, with an expansive parking lot, gift shop, restrooms and lots of people. The government tourist agency has made the spot beautiful. The river is wider, runs steadily but quietly, the river banks are green with trees and shrubbery — all carefully manicured, I concluded. There is a small amphitheater and shallow place where one can actually step in the Jordan if one wishes. All of it the very reason I was never much interested in visiting the Holy Land before. By coincidence we found ourselves alone in the quiet spot, and we read about Jesus and John and then we all dipped our hands in the water and remembered our own baptisms, and for many of us it was a moment of knowing, a moment given to us because we had come to this place, perhaps looking without even knowing that we were looking; a moment when we could have said those implausible words, "Lamb of God," and then followed him.

What are you looking for?

Sometimes, you have to look for a lifetime.

One of the best books of the season is a novel by Oscar Hijuelos, *Mr. Ives' Christmas*. It is about a good man, Mr. Ives, a modestly successful commercial artist, a devoted and faithful Catholic whose beloved son decides to be a priest. Just months before he is to enter seminary the boy is shot and killed by a young gang banger at Christmas time. The book is the poignant but wonderful story of Ives' search for answers to the question "Why," but more so, how to live with this terrible fact, with the enormous hole in his own life, his grief, anger, his doubt.

He even tries corresponding with his son's murderer who is in prison. That doesn't seem to help. But near the end, the young man who pulled the trigger is now out of jail, married, with children of his own and he wants to see and make peace with Ives. Ives' friends think he's crazy. They still want to hire a hit man to even the score.

The meeting happens. It is not easy. Ives still wanted to strangle the man who had killed his son years before. But he controlled himself. They embraced and Gomez muttered, through his tears, "Thank you and God bless you." It was Christmas again and the novel ends with Ives back in church.

> "There he sat, and as was his habit of old, he began his quiet meditation. Above the altar in that church was a statue of Christ, set back in a kind of nook, and on either side of him representations of the Holy Mother and Saint John the Baptist, with their expressions of inner knowledge..."

Ives looks and remembers one of his early childhood thoughts — that Jesus was actually in the altar and might actually appear ....

> "With pained but transcendent eyes, bearded and regal, He would come down the central aisle toward Ives, and placing his wounded hands on Ives' brow, give his blessing before taking him away and all others who were good in this world, off into heaven ... where they would be joined unto Him and all that is good forever and ever, without end." [p. 248]

Why are you here? What are you looking for? We are here for the same reason Ives was sitting in church, the same reason John's disciples followed him. We are looking for something to believe in and hold on to, something important enough to live for, something big enough to claim our passion, our devotion, our faith, an anchor, a purpose and a meaning, a challenge to be more, a promise of love forever, a hope ....

We are, that is to say, looking for him.

In the midst of your search may you find him and be found by him, and may you give your heart and follow him and stay with him all the days of your life.

Lamb of God — Son of God — the one who has come. All praise to him. Amen.